New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1951

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1951 PRODUCTIONS

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**Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of February 5, 1951*

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NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK POST HOME NEWS
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK TIMES

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"The Green Bay Tree"

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

February 2, 1951

= By HOWARD BARNES =

Revival in Full Bloom

MORDAUNT SHAIRP'S sinister study of tangled relationships, "The Green Bay Tree," has been revived with vigor and eloquence at the John Golden Theater. Joseph Schildkraut has returned from Hollywood to play the part of Mr. Dulcimer with fastidious malevolence. Denholm Elliott has the difficult task of following Laurence Olivier in the central role of Julian, but he handles it with delicacy and brilliant shading. Anne Crawford is the defeated woman in a curious design for living and Francis Compton and Mercer McLeod add fine bits of characterization to a play which depends mightily on them.

* * *

The Shepard Traube production and staging hew comparatively closely to the original Jed Harris offering of 1933. He has not been afraid to let conversation spell a strange mood behind footlights and he has been fortunate in Raymond Sovey's sharply contrasting settings for the action. If the melodramatic outburst of the climax in which Mr. Dulcimer is shot by Julian's real father is a bit abrupt, it is compensated for by a final scene of tragic implications. The author of "The Green Bay Tree" died some dozen years ago, but one feels certain that he would have found his mordant celebration of latent homosexuality well served in the current revival.

* * *

The theme of the drama is as involved as it appears to be simple. Taking its title from the Bible, it examines the fantastic corruption that a wealthy and lonely old man can work on a boy whom he has made over into his particular image of radiant youth. The plot is leisurely, but it has a constant cumulative effect as the youngster tries to break away from his protector and quite fails in the attempt. There is bitter humor in the exposition, notably in the scene in which Mr. Dulcimer gives a dinner for Julian and the nice girl he is in love with seated at different tables in an elegant flat. There is a definite air of Mayfair about the proceedings, but they have meaning and urgency.

* * *

Schildkraut is slightly affected as Mr. Dulcimer. It is difficult to see how he could have behaved otherwise. When he strokes a piano's keys with a Chopin rendition, places Julian in a cul-de-sac which lasts beyond his death, or fights Leonora for the affections of the youth, he is terribly convincing. Elliott, who gave such a good account of himself recently in "Ring Round the Moon," is excellent as Julian and Miss Crawford gives a tender and understanding portrayal of Leonora. Compton, as always, is a perfect butler, anticipating orders and whims with immaculate authority and McLeod is properly wrathful as Julian's real and reformed father. "The Green Bay Tree" is still a fine play, which richly deserves a fine revival.

"THE GREEN BAY TREE"

Play by Mordaunt Shairp; staged by Shepard Traube; settings by Raymond Sovey; presented by Mr. Traube at the John Golden Theatre, February 1, 1951. The cast:

Trump..... Francis Compton
Mr. Dulcimer..... Joseph Schildkraut
Julian..... Denholm Elliott
Leonora Yale... Anne Crawford
Mr. Owen..... Mercer McLeod

Synopsis: Time: The present. Act I. At Mr. Dulcimer's flat in Mayfair. Spring. Act II. Scene 1. At Mr. Owen's house in Camden Town. August. Scene 2. At Mr. Dulcimer's. The same evening. Act III. Scene 1. At Mr. Dulcimer's. The next morning. Scene 2. The same. Three weeks later.

The New York Times

February 2, 1951

Mordaunt Shairp's 'Green Bay Tree' Presented by Traube at the John Golden

By BROOKS ATKINSON

No matter how it is played, Mordaunt Shairp's "The Green Bay Tree" is a thoroughly absorbing drama. When Jed Harris produced it in 1933, the story centered about a half-suggested homosexual relationship between Mr. Dulcimer and his adopted son. With James Dale and Laurence Olivier in these parts, Mr. Harris' immaculate, detached performance made a superb piece of theatre.

In the performance put on by Shepard Traube at the John Golden Theatre last evening, the homosexual motivation is absent. Joseph Schildkraut plays Mr. Dulcimer as a fantastic sybarite who has made a career of luxury and aestheticism. You can read into his association with his ward an abnormal attraction if you want to, but Mr. Schildkraut does not put it there.

* * *

Played as a conflict between the wholesome vigor and decision of ordinary people and the vague corruption of idleness and aesthetic indulgence, "The Green Bay Tree" is still a remarkably interesting drama written with skill and subtlety. It is the story of a vain and selfish Epicurean who has reared up his adopted son, Julian, to enjoy wealth, to develop good taste in art and travel and to live aloof from the crowd. The boy falls in love with an alert and able young lady who is earning her own living.

When Mr. Dulcimer refuses to continue the boy's allowance, Julian tries to stand on his own feet as a member of society. But his charm is empty. He has no initiative or resourcefulness. Mr. Dulcimer has destroyed him with the luxury and artifice of their life.

The current performance cannot compare with the first one for craft and tone. Nor does Raymond Sovey's set for the drawing-room represent Mr. Dulcimer's exquisite taste. In the part of that Mayfair elegante, Mr. Schildkraut plays with sharpness of outline and authority, but perhaps with too much emotion. Isn't the part more arid and reserved in its personality?

Denholm Elliott, who played brilliantly in "Ring Round the Moon," admirably catches the good impulses and the weaknesses of Julian without sentimentalizing the part. And Anne Crawford gives a splendid performance as the girl who tries to restore Julian to normal society. Miss Crawford is a luminous young lady with a forceful spirit and extraordinary fluidity in her acting of scenes.

Francis Compton plays the sardonically deferential butler with the quiet skill we all delight in whenever we see him. And Mercer McLeod plays Julian's real father with the earnest desperation of a religious man who is horrified by his son's degradation.

As director, Mr. Traube could still polish the performance considerably. As far as that goes, the boys of Local No. 1 might also perfect their scene-shifting for the greater glory of art and morality. But "The Green Bay Tree" is a remarkably engrossing drama put together out of elusive impulses that build up great tension as the story goes along. As Mr. Schildkraut has proved, there is more than one way to play it and still preserve the horror and the tragedy.

DAILY NEWS

February 2, 1951

'The Green Bay Tree' Is Revived

By JOHN CHAPMAN

The exotic Mr. Dulcimer and his young protege, Julian, have returned to the theatre after nearly seventeen years. The apartment in which they live is not the exquisite affair which was designed for them by Robert Edmond Jones in 1933, but they remain an interesting pair in a well-made play by Mordaunt Shairp, "The Green Bay Tree."

At the John Golden Theatre last evening Joseph Schildkraut was Dulcimer, Denholm Elliott was Julian and Anne Crawford was Leonora Yale, the girl who is defeated in a gallant effort to destroy Dulcimer's unnatural affection for and silken hold upon a weak youth. All these performances are quite good—Elliott's in particular—and in addition there is Francis Compton behaving impeccably as the butler, Trump.

I don't suppose there is much of a reason for reviving "The Green Bay Tree" at this moment, except as a confession by the theatre that new scripts written with delicacy and perception are hard to come by. But there is no reason for not reviving it, either, and under Shepard Traube's direction it is being given a good performance.

People who were playgoing in 1933 will remember that "The Green Bay Tree" is about a wealthy, intelligent old pervert and his adopted son. The young man obeys the natural urge to fall in love with a girl, and the drama concerns the older man's methods of destroying this love. It is a suave and engrossing drama—and a cynical one, for the girl loses.

As I say, the acting is good. Mr. Schildkraut portrays Dulcimer with a fine mixture of super-elegance and feline ferocity, and Mr. Elliott, who recently was the two brothers in "Ring Round the Moon," plays with charm and sensitivity. Miss Crawford has the fresh, forthright quality needed for the part of the girl, and Mercer McLeod helps briefly as the boy's real, and most religious, father.

Raymond Sovey's scenic budget must have been considerably less than what the author, Mr. Shairp, had in mind when he described Dulcimer's London flat. The main setting is attractive enough, I suppose, but quite spare, and therefore does not match Dulcimer in character.

Daily Mirror

February 2, 1951

'Green Bay Tree' Is Play For a Special Audience

By ROBERT COLEMAN

Back in 1933 Jed Harris produced over here Mordaunt Shairp's controversial, "The Green Bay Tree," with a superlative cast. Unless our memory plays tricks upon us, it included James Dale, Laurence Olivier, Jill Esmond, O. P. Heggie and Leo Carroll. Last evening, Shepard Traube revived the study in decadence at the John Golden Theatre.

The tragedy, you may recall, has to do with an effete and wealthy man who falls in love with the voice of a young choir-boy, and persuades a drunken father to sell him for adoption. Instead of sending the youth to school, the delicate dilettante tutors his protege himself. Like the Biblical green bay tree, he selfishly spreads evil.

The boy is taught everything about luxury and nothing about how to earn a living or even how to pursue the arts professionally. When the spoiled young companion decides he wants to marry a wholesome and capable girl, the foster father ruthlessly cuts off his allowance, knowing that the pupil has become hopelessly addicted to an easy way of life.

In the end, the real father, who has reformed with evangelistic zeal, kills the corrupt aesthete to save his son. But it is too late. The boy, with wealth now at his command, becomes a replica of his worthless mentor.

Shairp has treated the subject, which could be highly offensive in clumsy hands, with taste and effective craftsmanship. He has used suggestion rather than overt statement in portraying the morbid relationship. Traube, serving as his own director, has staged the revival with reticence and discrimination.

Joseph Schildkraut, after a lengthy stay in Hollywood, has returned to etch the devilish Mr. Duicmer with suave and Svengali-ish strokes. Denholm Elliott, who won critical salutes recently in "Ring Round the Moon," is excellent as the weak victim. Anne Crawford, Mercer McLeod and Francis Compton do well by the other roles.

Raymond Sovey has designed the atmospheric settings.

After a lapse of some 18 years it is difficult to make comparisons, but we remember the original version as having a sophisticated polish lacking in the current presentation. And we find it difficult to generate much sympathy for callous hedonism in these parlous times. "The Green Bay Tree" strikes us as being a special play for a special audience.

Journal-American

February 2, 1951

A Strong Though Rather Soiled Play

By JOHN McCLAIN

"The Green Bay Tree," which was revived last night at the John Golden Theatre, is a strong though somewhat soiled play.

The theme is based on the abnormal hold which an elderly man of means exerts on a youth he has "adopted," and the losing battle waged by an attractive young woman who falls in love with the lad.

Much as I am personally opposed to the entire premise I must submit that Mordaunt Shairp, the author, has made his characters believable and the small cast consisting of Joseph Schildkraut, Denholm Elliott, Anne Crawford, Francis Compton and Mercer McLeod played their parts to perfection.

After all, there are people like this in the world and I suppose a consideration of their problems falls logically within the scope of the theatre. My objection is the simple old-fashioned one of being slightly revolted by the spectacle of corruption in triumph.

• • •

'Purchased' Youth

As the story goes Joseph Schildkraut has virtually purchased Denholm Elliott from a drunken and irresponsible father and brought him up in an atmosphere of wealth and sophistication. Then Anne Crawford enters the picture and falls in love with the boy.

Despite the protests of Schildkraut he leaves the plush premises and goes back to his father's dreary house, determined to study and make himself capable of earning a living for his bride-to-be.

Almost on the eve of the nuptials, however, he accepts an invitation to return to the home of his foster father. The excuse is that he will persuade Schildkraut to continue his allowance. That, of course, is the end of him.

He winds up convinced that the best thing he can do is give up his silly idea of marriage and instead take a six months vacation with Schildkraut in Italy.

The real father and the girl arrive before he can leave and the father, finding verbal persuasion inadequate to stop the junket, pulls out a nickle-plated revolver and puts the chill on the villain.

• • •

Rejects Girl

This should be the cue for the lovers to fall into each other's arms. But no. The boy has inherited Schildkraut's loot, and he rejects her offer to give it all up and get married. In the last scene he is wearing white gloves and arranging flowers, in the exact manner of his benefactor.

The tale is intelligently told, and I suppose less evil minds can construe it all as a case of the victory of wealth over ideals.

I might go for that, too, except that I have yet to know a normal young man who would take off for Italy with an older man when he has a girl of Miss Crawford's obvious charms panting to marry him. There ain't that much money.

This is none-the-less a provocative play, extremely well cast and directed, and I think it will reasonably reward the investors.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

February 2, 1951

'Green Bay Tree' Disappointing

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Type—Drama.

Topic—Luxury.

Mood—Sinister.

I find it—Disappointing.

The current revival of "The Green Bay Tree" has been the occasion for eager anticipation on the part of drama lovers for some time.

In the fall of 1933 the play was considered somewhat daring and ran about 15 weeks. But it is most often recalled as the vehicle that introduced Laurence Olivier to American audiences.

Having never seen it or read it before, I was most interested in this opportunity, and felt quite let down. This reaction comes chiefly from a deliberate, forthright approach to a play which should be extremely subtle. A few weeks out of town would have created a mighty different performance.

Adoption by Purchase.

This is the story of an extremely wealthy man who has literally bought a young boy for adoption from his drunken father. By rearing the boy to have cultured tastes, and no practical abilities, he utterly demoralizes him.

The young man falls in love, tries to break away from his useless life of luxury, and fails. Even after he is dead, the possessive and pleasure-loving rich man controls the young fellow's destiny.

There are fascinating possibilities to this story, and the play is well written. It seems to me to be one of those scripts which should be performed with great emphasis on the hints and suggestions in the lines, rather than on their face value.

Performance of Merit.

Joseph Schildkraut plays the rich foster father, and it is a performance of undeniable merit; suave, crafty and threatening. The character has certain eccentricities which are used dramatically. He

"The Green Bay Tree"—*continued*

wears white gloves to arrange flowers. He likes to pretend his drawing room is a restaurant. He enjoys ordering his butler to do simple personal tasks for him.

It seemed to me that in exaggerating these peculiarities, the actor was allowed to make the character phony. This is all a matter of degree, but I believe the man would have said his habits were his privilege, and assumed they were normal rather than flaunt them.

Denholm Elliott, late the twins of "Ring Round the Moon," is excellent in the tricky part of the boy. The main point of this character is that he must remain absolutely masculine while his deep weakness is progressively revealed.

Luxury vs. Love.

This Elliott does, even through the hysterical second-act curtain, when he cannot make the choice of giving up luxury for the girl he wants to marry.

Anne Crawford, making her Broadway debut, hits exactly the right quality for the girl.

New York Post
HOME NEWS
February 2, 1951

Decline of 'The Green Bay Tree'

By Richard Watts Jr.

Playgoers who were seeing the late Mordaunt Shairp's "The Green Bay Tree" for the first time, when it was revived at the John Golden Theatre last night, must have wondered why it was once so highly regarded or why anyone bothered to produce it again. What they saw was a rather tedious drama, not very impressively acted, about the struggle for the soul of a dull young man between a debonair hedonist, who wanted him to lead a life of idle luxury, and a girl, who wanted to make a veterinary out of him. I assure you it was at one time more than that.

I am afraid that we ancient critics seem pretty wearying to a new generation of theatregoers when we contrast the glories of a performance we saw a decade and a half ago with the inadequacies of a revival we glowered through the previous evening. I must, however, take the risk, not because I find any nostalgic pleasure in growing ecstatic about the enchanted past, but because it is only right that justice should be done to a deceased dramatist who wrote a fine play, which was notably produced here by Jed Harris in 1933.

Sense of Horror

For "The Green Bay Tree" was a fine play, a chilling and sinister drama about a ruthless, exquisite homosexual who dominated the life of a well-meaning but weak young man and molded him in his own image, even after he was shot down by the boy's maddened father. There was an evil, decadent sense of horror about it that was inescapably fascinating, and there was a curious kind of pity in it, too, because the monstrous and unhealthy old fellow, who dominated it, was also oddly pathetic in his tortured loneliness.

All the atmosphere of quiet, almost unspoken terror is gone from it now. Apparently Shepard Traube, who produced it, and Joseph Schildkraut, who now acts its leading role, shied away from that ominous note of the homosexual and tried to substitute for it the considerably healthier menace of a desire for sybaritic luxury. I can understand their discomfort over that suggestion of the epicene, but, if they felt that way, they shouldn't have done "The Green Bay Tree." As it is, they have produced a drama that isn't about much of anything.

Flower Arrangement

It seemed to me that almost everything has gone wrong with the production. The central figure, who was not only sinister but a man of culture and subtle interest, is neither frightening nor interesting. Raymond Sovey's setting never suggests the cultured luxury of this Mr. Dulcimer's life. There is a scene in which Mr. Dulcimer merely cuts and arranges some flowers, and it became, in the original production, a symbolic ritual of dramatic importance. In the current performance, it seems to mean very little. The play may gain in health, but it suffers in power.

Mr. Schildkraut makes Dulcimer a rather dashing and debonair hedonist, but the necessary quality of decadent evil is missing. Denholm Elliott, who was so fine as the twin brother in "Ring Round the Moon," is far less effective as the young man trying to make up his mind between curing sick animals and leading a life of ease. Anne Crawford, of the British films, is believable as the girl, but she never manages to make her very interesting. Only the reliable Francis Compton, as Mr. Dulcimer's butler, captures the proper note of subtle menace. He is the one player who seems to admit what the play is about.

"The Mikado"

Journal American
January 30, 1951

Grab a Seat—You'll Have a Fine Time

By JOHN McCLAIN

It seems entirely superfluous to be sitting here at a late hour considering the efforts of the D'Oyly Carte Opera in presenting Gilbert and Sullivan's "The Mikado" at the St. James Theatre last night.

The talents of the author and composer are established and so are the abilities of almost every member of the current company.

I suppose the show has been more pretentiously produced—the two sets are mostly simple flats and backdrops—but the general Japanese illusion is maintained and certainly the material has never been more skillfully sung and acted. There may have been a more artful and engaging comedian than Martyn Green, but if so it was before my time.

Seeing it once more, hearing "Tit Willow," "A Wandering Minstrel I" and the other tunes which have rung in one's ears from childhood is an experience which any adult should recapture and, if at all possible, insinuate upon his offspring.

The story, you recall, concerns Nanki-Poo, the son of the Mikado of Japan who flees his father's court because he is being pursued by Katisha, an elderly lady with a face like a highway accident.

Disguised as a wandering minstrel he comes to the town of Titipu and falls in love with Yum-Yum, who happens to be on the brink of marrying Ko-Ko, the lord high executioner.

This causes a rash of complications. At first Yum-Yum is going to marry Nanki-Poo, and then Ko-Ko will behead him after 30 days and take over the bride. But Ko-Ko doesn't want to kill anybody, so they finally settle for an affadavit which merely says the execution has taken place.

Then the Mikado himself arrives, discovers his son's fate and is about to take steps against the persons who apparently caused his death. The only out is for Ko-Ko to propose to Katisha, which rather loosely permits everybody to live happily thereafter.

It is all wild and improbable, but nobody cares because the music is compelling and extremely well rendered by Margaret Mitchell, Neville Griffiths, Richard Watson, Ella Halman, Darrell Fancourt and, of course, Martyn Green.

The latter takes incredible liberties with his part, occasionally stepping out of character to get laughs, but he constantly succeeds. If somebody locked him in a room with Milton Berle I'm not sure he wouldn't be the one to emerge.

The entire cast, down to the last member of the chorus, has the gift of articulation, thus permitting the audience to follow points in the plot which are handled in song.

I thought the costumes were at all times adequate and the direction seemed to lend this production more pace than I recall noting the last time I caught the company.

Gilbert and Sullivan are a richly deserved tradition and this is one of their good operas, ably presented. Grab yourself a seat—you'll have a good time.

"THE MIKADO"

Operetta by W. S. Gilbert, with music by Arthur Sullivan; settings and costumes by Charles Ricketts; presented by the D'Oyly Carte Opera Company at the St. James Theatre, January 29, 1951. The cast:

The Mikado of Japan.....Darrell Fancourt
Nanki-Poo....Neville Griffiths
Ko-Ko.....Martyn Green
Pooh-Bah.....Richard Watson
Pish-Tush.....Alan Styler
Go-To.....Donald Harris
Yum-Yum...Margaret Mitchell
Pitti-Sing.....Joan Gillingham
Peep-Bo.....Joyce Wright
Katisha.....Ella Halman

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

January 30, 1951

By OTIS L. GUERNSEY JR.

Sullivan on a Celeste

THE D'OYLY CARTE OPERA COMPANY is back in town for a visit at the St. James Theater, and this means that the best of all Gilbert and Sullivan is now available to New York theatergoers. If last night's presentation of "The Mikado" is indicative of the general quality of the repertory, the aficionados of Savoyard satire are going to have a wonderful time this winter. Darrell Fancourt and Martyn Green are present in their delightfully familiar roles, and the new tenor, Neville Griffiths, could sing with any of the predecessors heard here in previous American tours. With the whole company rigidly in form and making Sullivan's music sound as though it were being played on a celeste, this return visit of the D'Oyly Carte should be welcomed with rounds of hearty applause.

* * *

From the wandering minstrel's melodies through the list of the growling Mikado's punishments, this show sustains all its melody and satire into another half-century. Griffiths, the Nanki-Poo, is an excellent acquisition, a performer of impeccable vocal accomplishment who, according to the program, had his first audition only last year. It will be a pleasure to hear him in the tenor roles of future productions, as it was to hear him in the solos, duets and group numbers in the role of the wandering minstrel. New as he may be, and traditional as this musical form is required to be, he is only a part of a troupe that approaches the Gilbert and Sullivan work with enthusiasm, virtuosity and a perfect confidence that the material speaks eloquently for itself.

* * *

Fancourt's appearance as the Mikado in the second act is the high point of the operetta. He is exactly as one remembers him—hideous with comic leers and booming with bass-barytone authority as he tries to drown out his daughter-in-law elect and describes the fates in store for evildoers. Green's Ko-Ko is the show's mainstay in a supple slapstick performance which endures through the years. Cavorting dancing, gesturing and waving his various props, he runs through a semi-acrobatic performance that has become as traditional as the contrasting stiff gestures of the chorus. In any other show he would be classed as the star, but it is long established protocol that the Messrs. Gilbert and Sullivan are the only stars in a D'Oyly Carte production.

* * *

The only comment one can make upon these famous collaborators at this time is that "The Sun and I" and the marriage quartet are still lovely to hear; that a pompous office-holder, an embarassed maiden reluctant to die for love or a soft-hearted executioner are still amusing caricatures. No one would be surprised at this, but it is good to see a fine group giving these fancies the care and polish they deserve. Among the principals are Richard Watson as a portly Pooh-Bah and Ella Halman as the strident Katisha. Isadore Godfrey keeps things going precisely in the orchestra pit, and Charles Ricketts has designed the symbolic scenery and elaborate costumes.

The first of four operettas to be exhibited here, "The Mikado" finds the company under the managership of Bridget D'Oyly Carte carrying on admirably in a grand and delightful tradition.

New York Post

HOME NEWS

January 30, 1951

The Happy Return of 'The Mikado'

By Richard Watts Jr.

In a chaotic, restless, changing world, the celebrated D'Oyly Carte Opera Company, of London, goes right on placidly presenting the same old famous Gilbert and Sullivan masterpieces in the same old famous way, and I continue to find something very cheering about it. Last night at the St. James Theatre, the Savoyards began their local season, as usual, with "The Mikado," with those distinguished veterans, Martyn Green and Darrell Fancourt, in their customary roles, and, as one who loves the Savoy operas more the older I grow, I was happy.

It is not that "The Mikado" is by any means my favorite Gilbert and Sullivan work. The one I cherish most is "Iolanthe," and I wish the visitors would open their season with it for a change. It isn't even that I think the tale of Titipu is the finest of their productions, because I suspect they are on occasion just a trifle too coy about it. But "The Mikado" is a warmly characteristic example of Britain's favorite composer and lyricist in action, and, even if their other operas were lost, it would give us a proper idea of their genius.

The Players

The news for Gilbert and Sullivan addicts is how the Messrs. Green and Fancourt are faring, and I am pleased to report that they are still doing very well, indeed. Mr. Green's Ko-Ko is his most unrestrained performance, and I still suspect him of growing a little extravagant in his whimsy at times, but he is quite wonderful at it just the same, and there is no doubt that he continues to be one of the greatest of all Gilbertian comics. And Mr. Fancourt's Mikado is just as delightfully ferocious as ever, and a great comfort to all beholders.

My favorite of all the Savoyards was Sidney Granville, and I am always inclined to resent anyone else who plays Pooh-Bah, but Richard Watson, who now has the role, has sensibly copied his performance after Mr. Granville, with the result that he is everything that could be asked for. Some of the other players, it seemed to me, made the delightful lyrics occasionally difficult to understand, which is a pity, but for most of the time the immortal words are properly audible, and everything is very comforting.

Added Virtues

So much has been written, including by me, about the joyful virtues of the Gilbert and Sullivan classics, that I would rather pass over them today, and, instead of applauding the enchanting music and the incomparable lyrics, concentrate on the curious warmth and sense of well-being that the works bring to the sensible spectator. It is a little odd that the waspish satire of Gilbert should carry such a heartwarming quality with it, but few achievements in theatre history can make one more at peace with the world. Among other things, what propagandists Gilbert and Sullivan were for the British spirit!

There apparently is some unwritten law of the D'Oyly Carte Company that no beautiful girls are to be included in their casts, but, so good for the soul did I find "The Mikado," that I feel like a monster for saying anything so ungracious. I would rather turn to the glowing virtues of the production, including the loving and understanding way in which the veteran Isadore Godfrey leads the orchestra. Mr. Godfrey is one of the Savoy blessings, and we addicts are people who, when we praise the name of Godfrey, mean Isadore and not Arthur.

DAILY NEWS

January 30, 1951

Here's a How D'You Do and Happy To See You to Some Old Friends

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Memo to the Managing Editor: Dear Mr. Sir: I covered a show last evening at the St. James Theatre, which you may have noticed is my regular line of work, and now I should do a piece about it for the paper just to prove I was on the job. But I must confess I wasn't on the job, exactly. I was jut sitting there having a good time and not thinking that something should be written about the how afterward, so maybe you shouldn't have to pay me for not working.

The show was the D'Oyly Carte Company's "The Mikado." You know, my greatly respected employer, that nothing new can be said about Gilbert and Sullivan operettas at this date. You know also that nothing new or bright can be said about the D'Oyly Carte Company, except that it is visiting us for the first time in three seasons and that it will stay here only a month.

What would you say, if you had my job and I had yours, about dear and wonderful friends like Darrell Fancourt, Martyn Green, Richard Watson, Ella Halman and Margaret Mitchell? You'd say that they sang the roles of the Mikado, Ko-Ko, Pooh-Bah, Katisha and Yum-Yum in their usual fine style. You would observe that the hair of Isidore Godfrey, the orchestra leader, is still an enchanting pink and that he conducts Arthur Sullivan's music lovingly and beautifully.

A New Nanki-Poo.

You might have observed that Neville Griffiths is a new tenor hereabout, that he is a commendable Nanki-Poo and that his first song, about the wand'ring minstrel, is one of the most beguiling of all the G & S tunes. And you'd end up your piece by saying that the com-

pany as a whole sings and moves with the precision and clarity which are the hallmarks of the D'Oyly Carte people. And if you were a sentimentalist you'd have said something about how grand it is to see Green bouncing around once more in the "Here's a how d'you do" number, and Fancourt making awful faces as he promises to make the punishment fit the crime.

Well, I just sat there with a grin on my face and a lump in my throat, and instead of thinking about writing a piece I was having a good time and thinking about how, even now, there are some nice things and nice people in the world. So you really shouldn't have to pay me for a night's work. Perhaps I should pay you just for the fun of it—but this would put you in another tax bracket, dear Mr. Sir, and the money wouldn't do you any good anyway.

The New York Times

January 30, 1951

D'Oyly Carte Opera Company Begins New Engagement in 'The Mikado'

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Just when things look gloomiest, you can depend upon the D'Oyly Carte Company to turn up with a full stock of Gilbert and Sullivan operas. They opened at the St. James last evening with a perfectly correct performance of "The Mikado."

The gist of the good news is that the D'Oyly Carte Company is in the finest fettle. Isidore Godfrey's carrot-top has been daintily thinned by the years, but it still rises there in the orchestra pit like a token of perfection in Sullivan musicology. Mr. Godfrey is master of the medium. No one on the stage or in the audience has to worry much when he waits for quiet in the house and then waves the stick for the immortal overture and for the incomparable male choral singing that open "The Mikado."

* * *

Greetings are herewith extended to Martyn Green, who is as essential as Mr. Godfrey. His voice is still light and mettlesome, his accent is unexceptionable and his sense of humor is still sunny. If Mr. Green were not singing Ko-Ko he could easily double in some impish ballet, for his feet and his body are as eloquent as his voice. Welcome again also to Darrell Fancourt whose monstrously imaginative Mikado is one of the great creations of our time. It has stature, heroic humor and a macabre appetite for cruelty. No one is likely to improve much on Ella Halman's contralto Katisha, the female ogre. Miss Halman sings the part imposingly with a sardonic overtone.

Margaret Mitchell sings Yum-Yum enchantingly and acts the part with demure mockery. As a love-sick wandering minstrel, Neville Griffiths is astonishingly wide, well-fed and solid on the hoof, but he has an excellent tenor voice and sings delightfully. Richard Watson's Pooh-Bah is capitally done in the fond tradition of modified buffoonery.

May an aging myrmidon of the D'Oyly Carte revels peevishly remark that the clear reading of the lines is not what it used to be, say, seventy-five years ago? Although no one ever expects to hear the words of a song, the D'Oyly Carte Company has always been a merciful exception. You can depend on the crisp accent of the oldsters who have been with the company for years. But it is wise for people in the audience to take their Braille transcriptions of the lyrics to read while the new singers are imitating the slovenly speech of great singing artists.

Still, the Gilbert and Sullivan follies are back in town for a brief engagement, and life is not quite so grim as it was before.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

January 30, 1951

D'Oyly Carte Sticks to G & S in 'Mikado'

By LOUIS BIANCOLLI

What may be regarded as the original of all the Gilbert and Sullivan carbon companies moved into the St. James Theater last night with a bright performance of "The Mikado."

The D'Oyly Carte Company, to which all Savoyards owe the safekeeping of a great tradition, will be on hand for four weeks. If last night's performance was any token of the company's resources, there are many good things in store for the American clientele in the month ahead.

To begin with, there was no attempt to jam up "The Mikado" and put it in tune with the times. Tradition took the form of adhering to text and score as closely as possible and keeping the fun on the soft-pedaled side of buffoonery.

The McCoy.

I have heard performances of "The Mikado" that whipped up a great deal more hilarity than last night's, but always at the sacrifice of the subtler undercurrents of entertainment in the work. There was nothing loud or rowdy about the reading, and for all true Savoyards it looked and sounded like the McCoy.

The company was like one cozy, harmonious family, with all on an equal footing and nobody trying to dominate anybody else. One member of the cast was as conspicuous—or as inconspicuous—as the next, with the possible exception of Richard Watson, whose assignment it was to maneuver Poo-Bah's traditional bulk around the stage. He was a one-man road block.

I thought Neville Griffiths sang quite charmingly as Nanki-Poo, and as for Margaret Mitchell, she made it quite plain why even so churlish an executioner as Ko-Ko could lose his ax and heart over Yum-Yum. Sisters Pitti-Sing and Peep-Bo were no back numbers either as they materialized in the fetching figures of Joan Gillingham and Joyce Wright.

Sprightly Executioner.

There was plenty of bounce to Martyn Green's version of Ko-Ko. I never saw a sprightlier executioner, and the flow of chatter was just as sprightly.

There was a brief ovation for Ella Halman, when the orchestra sounded several ominous chords and the menacing figure of Katisha burst into Ko-Ko's courtyard and cast her longing eyes on Nanki-Poo. She sounded just as sinister.

Isidore Godfrey conducted an orchestra that knew how to keep its place in the dynamic scheme of things. In its quietly efficent way, it too seemed to be determined to show that "The Mikado" could be kept alive without pumping the lastest brand of laughing gas into it.

Daily Mirror

January 30, 1951

D'Oyly Carte Players In Top Form for 'Mikado'

By ROBERT COLEMAN

The beloved D'Oyly Carte Opera Company returned to New York last evening and received a right royal welcome from the Savoyards assembled in the St. James Theatre for the occasion. We don't know whether or not a sound genius like Saki Oura has improved the acoustics of the house, but anyway the visiting troupe never seemed to be in better voice.

The opening attraction of the current engagement was "The Mikado." It afforded the incomparable Martyn Green an opportunity to shine as Ko-Ko, comic Lord Executioner of Titipu. Green's performance in this role has taken on subtleties and nuances since last we saw and heard him. He applies the slapstick brush to the part with the sureness of a Saville Row tailor measuring an Earl for a morning coat.

Darrell Fancourt is again the wonderfully glowering, fiendish Mikado. And Ella Halman is an excellent Katisha. This is one of the most difficult roles in all the Gilbert and Sullivan repertory to bring off successfully. And she does it ample justice.

One of the most welcome newcomers to the celebrated company is Neville Griffiths. He brings an admirable voice and stage presence to the role of Nanki-Poo. We shouldn't be surprised at all if Rudolf Bing, impresario of the august Metropolitan Opera, paid a visit to scout young Griffiths. He merits attention.

Margaret Mitchell is one of the best Yum-Yums we have heard in many semesters of G. & S. playgoing. Others meriting salutes are Richard Watson, Alan Styler, Donald Harris, Joan Gillingham and Joyce Wright.

Charles Ricketts has designed fresh and appropriate scenery and costumes for the ever-popular classic. Premier Clement Attlee must have paid tribute to America by rescinding austerity regulations so that the visitors might show to best advantage over here.

The orchestra is again under the direction of Isidore Godfrey. This red haired, dynamic maestro has become a great favorite with local Savoyards. And rightly so.

A bow from the waist also is due the expert ensemble. The choristers have been carefully schooled in the traditions of Gilbert and Sullivan. They move with unerring precision, and lend a felicitous musical backing to the principals.

We have never enjoyed the D'Oyly Carte Opera Company more than we did last evening. We are happy to report that this fine troupe is in top form. Our advice is: buy your tickets immediately for the limited engagement. You may have to stand in line—and this is rather treacherous weather in which to stand in line—unless you rush to the St. James at the first opportunity.

"Peer Gynt"

Journal American

January 29, 1951

This Is for Garfield And Ibsen Fans Only

By JOHN McCLAIN

There are many laudable and exciting elements in the A.N.T.A. version of Hendrik Ibsen's "Peer Gynt" which was offered at their playhouse last night with John Garfield in the starring part.

The production is fluid and ingenious, almost austere in its simplicity, but always adequately suggestive of the enormous scope of the drama. For this, one can be indebted to Donald Oenslager, who did the sets, and Lee Strasberg, who directed.

A further medal of merit should be awarded Paul Green, who modernized and Americanized the original script. There is nothing oblique or even vaguely classical in what remains.

Expressing his altogether selfish, philosophy of life the hero says, "A fellow has to look out for Number One," or almost identical words, and the same contemporary pattern is followed throughout.

The dances, especially those executed by the Trolls, and the folk numbers in the early stanzas, are fresh and imaginative without interrupting the mood or action of the moment. All that is very much on the plus side of the ledger.

On the other side, however, is the fact that "Peer Gynt" is not, in my opinion, a truly formidable play and John Garfield is not a stage actor of sufficient stature to make up for its inadequacies.

The basic idea of the play is by now fairly pedestrian, and the single means by which it could be elevated into something approaching true importance would require the services of a classical actor. Through his long association with movies, and no fault of his own, I was never once convinced that Mr. Garfield was really Mr. Gynt.

Another thing I didn't understand was the careful avoidance of using at least some of the delightful music composed by Edvard Grieg to accompany the drama. Maybe there is a good reason, but they do use music and none of it impressed me as being mildly comparable to the original nostalgic "Suite."

In case you have forgotten the plot it can be told in one sentence: there's no place like home. Peer Gynt, a restless and ambitious young man, roams the world seeking wealth, power and affection—and winds up an old man realizing that all this was easily within his grasp in his own back yard.

Along the line he gets mixed up with Trolls (Norwegian for Pixies or Leprachauns), a group of strange expatriates in North Africa and a mental institution in Egypt, thus spanning the years from youth to old age.

Yes, sure, the home-town doll is there waiting when he gets back.

In this part I thought Pearl Lang laboreu nobly and well, and I can only say about Sherry Britton, a grind artiste who made her bow in the show as the daughter of the Troll King, that if I had been Mr. Gynt I would have settled down with her in Trollville, as she suggested and there would have been no second act.

You've got to like Ibsen a lot—sans music—and you've got to be a big Garfield fan. Otherwise I don't think you'll have an entirely satisfactory evening at the current "Peer Gynt."

"PEER GYNT"

Play by Henrik Ibsen, adapted by Paul Green, with music by Lan Adomian; staged by Lee Strasberg; setting by Donald Oenslager; choreography by Valerie Bettis; costumes by Rose Bogdanoff; presented by Cheryl Crawford, in association with R. L. Stevens, for the American National Theatre and Academy at the ANTA Playhouse, January 28, 1951. The cast:

Aase.....Mildred Dunnock
Peer Gynt.....John Garfield
An Elderly Man....Ray Gordon
An Elderly Woman...Ann Boley
Aslak.....John Randolph
Solveig.....Pearl Lang
Her Father.....Joseph Anthony
Her Mother.....Anne Hegira
A Buttonmolder...Karl Malden
Ingrid.....Rebecca Darke
Her Father...Nehemia Persoff
Her Mother....Peggy Meredith
Mads Moen.....Mahlon Naill
His Father.....Edward Binns
His Mother.....Lisa Baker
The Master Cook...Ray Gordon
1st Herd Girl....Lucille Patton
2nd Herd Girl....Barbara Gaye
3rd Herd Girl.....
Beverlee Bozeman
A Greenclad Woman....
Sherry Britton
The Troll King..Nehemia Persoff
The Ugly Brat.....Ed Horner
The Voice.....John Randolph
Kari.....Lisa Baker
Monsieur Ballon..Joseph Anthony
Herr Von Eberkopf.....
Edward Binns
Mr. Cotton.....Richard Purdy
Herr Trompetstraale....
John Randolph
The Flutist.....Hillel
A Thief.....Ray Gordon
A Healer.....Ed Horner
A Singer.....Aviva
Anitra.....Sono Osato
Dr. Begriffenfeldt.....
Joseph Anthony
Hussein.....Richard Purdy

DAILY NEWS

January 29, 1951

ANTA's 'Peer Gynt' Handsomely Mounted as a Fable for Garfield

By JOHN CHAPMAN

By quite a margin, "Peer Gynt" is the most interesting production of the American National Theatre and Academy to date. It has been planned well as a mixture of acting, dancing and singing and it has been arrestingly and ingeniously mounted by the scene designer, Donald Oenslager, with the very fine help of Rose Bogdanoff, the costumer. In the long and tricky title role is John Garfield and among the supporting performers are worthy people like Karl Malden, Mildred Dunnock and Sono Osato. I wish I could give this venture, which opened last evening at the ANTA Playhouse, something better than a qualified endorsement.

"Peer Gynt" was a whimsey by Ibsen about a man who starts looking for himself. It has been adapted, or put into vernacular but not particularly poetic English, by Paul Green. It should always have about it an air of innocence and wonderment and a bit of spiritual splendor as it relates the fable of Gynt, the young fellow who samples practically all there is in life in his mad search for happiness. It should not have, I think, the feeling that I detected in it last night—that it seems to be more like a weekend with Errol Flynn than it is like a morality drama.

An Energetic Performance.

Mr. Garfield does a remarkably energetic and outwardly skillful job as he leads Peer Gynt along the rocky path of life. He begins as a heartless and hard-drinking youth; he becomes at various times an Oriental potentate, the richest and most powerful man in the Western world, a companion of unearthly creatures called trolls, and, at the end, an aged bum who discovers that what he has been traipsing around for was what he had in the first place—the love of a nice girl.

This performance is interesting, for Mr. Garfield has a tense and vivid personality and he achieves some remarkable changes of costume and makeup. I am sure he is the strongest of all Peer Gynts, if it isn't his friend Flynn, but I am not so sure he is the most sensitive.

Mr. Oenslager's setting, which is basically a spiral stair on a turntable, is one of the admirable achievements of the season. It seems simple, but it is remarkably adaptable to changes of scene and of mood. I'd say that Mr. Oenslager got closer to Ibsen's "Peer Gynt" than Mr. Green did, for this prairie poet's adaptation is quite earthbound.

ANTA has shot the works on a very large and quite capable company, and Lee Strasberg, the director, has got the company working together quite well. Miss Osato and a number of attractive young ladies dance exotically; there is some music by Lan Adomian which doesn't sound in the least like Grieg, and Mr. Malden is a most charming messenger of Death. "Peer Gynt" is a rich stage spectacle, conscientiously acted and directed. It should satisfy ANTA's subscribers, even though Ibsen's original hero and my humble self may still be wandering about the earth looking for something better.

New York World-Telegram
and
The Sun

January 29, 1951

'Peer Gynt' Spins A Timeless Yarn

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Type—Fantasy
Topic—Ambition
Ideas—Timeless
Production—Beautiful
I find it—Praiseworthy

The revival of Ibsen's "Peer Gynt" which was offered in the ANTA Series last night is remarkable in many ways. It is rich, elaborate and detailed in staging.

Both the mood and the appearance are vivid. Paul Green's new version plays easily. It seems extraordinarily modern without ever using obviously present-day expressions.

This is one of Ibsen's earlier plays. It was written in 1867 as a dramatic poem.

Peer Gynt is a wild and imaginative mountain lad. His roughness and his lying offend people. Suddenly he runs off with a bride who is disappointed in her marriage. He deserts her very soon, and becomes an outcast.

Life With Spirits.

He tries to find some sort of life among the pagan spirits of the hills. They actually see things the way Peer pretends he does. But their ugliness and wantonness drive him away.

His mother, who has always done her best to help him, is enchanted, even on her deathbed, by his limitless imagination.

He makes money and loses it trying to become Emperor of the world. Finally, at the end of his life, he is only good enough to be tossed back into the melting pot of humans, to be molded again. Since he has no conscience, his sins have no significance.

He realizes too late that nobody can exist alone. The only "self" he could ever have had was in terms of duty. But he is finally saved by the lasting devotion of the girl he deserted.

The wild adventures of Peer have great color, as he romances across Africa, and only comes close to being a ruler in an insane asylum.

The company is a very big one, and the physical setting is endlessly ingenious. Everybody connected with this project should be congratulated for its smoothness.

A rough circular stairway on a revolving stage serves an unbelievable number of functions. There are many curtains and insets, as well as profitably managed lights. The variety of scene is breath taking.

The whole production, too, is punctuated with exciting dances and music. In rehearsal it would seem that more time was spent on the crowded scenes, naturally enough. They run quickly and always have vigor and pattern.

Loses Speed.

When the play grows serious it loses velocity. This does not seem necessary to underline the philosophy, and will surely be corrected as it plays a few times.

John Garfield is most impressive in the title role. He is virile and rebellious. He is also poetic, but in an earthy manner that seems entirely contemporary.

Mildred Dunnock is fine as the mother. ambitious and physically weak, but capable of big rages as well as touching moods.

Sono Osato is delightful as a wanton Arab girl, and Sherry Britton is equally engaging as a wicked mountain spirit. Pearl Lang is gentle and graceful as Peer's true love, and Karl Malden has quiet dignity for the role of the Button Molder.

This is a lusty, inspiring and vivid experience.

New York Post
HOME NEWS
January 29, 1951

Around the World With Peer Gynt

By Richard Watts Jr.

Ibsen's "Peer Gynt" is one of the celebrated dramatic works of the world theatre, and the American National Theatre and Academy was again performing one of its proper functions when it offered Paul Green's adaptation of the eminent Norwegian's morality play at the ANTA Playhouse last night. Since the idea was a courageously ambitious one, and Donald Oenslager has designed a fluid and interesting setting for the production, I wish I could be happier about the whole result, but I must admit that "Peer Gynt" is not one of my favorite classics, and my enthusiasm must be gloomily limited.

To put down the pleasant things first, I repeat that Mr. Oenslager's settings are not only ingenious and interesting but also admirably suited to the requirements of a presentation demanding pace and movement. Then, too, the entire production, aided by Lee Strasberg's direction and Valerie Bettis' choreography, has color, variety and vigor. Physically, this "Peer Gynt" represents an effective job of theatrical craftsmanship, and, although I think I would have preferred the familiar Grieg musical accompaniment, the new incidental music by Lan Adomian also adds to the liveliness of the proceedings.

The Adaptation

Not having read the standard adaptation of the work for many years, nor seen it on the stage since Joseph Schildkraut acted in it some quarter of a century ago, I cannot say how closely Mr. Green's version follows the original. It strikes me, though, that it is a fairly free rendering of the Ibsen text, but is entirely faithful to the spirit of the drama and reasonably close to the letter. If "Peer Gynt," despite its fame as dramatic literature, is nevertheless only mildly and intermittently interesting, the chief responsibility must, I think, be charged to the account of good old Henrik Ibsen himself.

Since "Peer Gynt," which is, among other things, a kind of theatrical travelogue, moves picturesquely from Norway to Africa and back again, with stopovers at the dark mountain hall of the Troll King, the Moroccan coast, the Sahara, the Sphinx and a madhouse in Cairo, it is assuredly a lively enough drama. But, despite all the impressive things which have been written about it, the play seems to me to belong to the school of which it is said that there is less in it than meets the eye. As a spiritual biography of Peer Gynt's soul, it is neither emotionally nor intellectually very impressive.

Peer's Soul

Playwrights since the days of J. M. Barrie have made a cliche of the drama in which the success of all famous men is attributed to their wives, but Ibsen goes even a bit farther. His hero's soul is saved from the Button Molder, that symbol of death, by the love of a good woman, and I think that Molnar did the same thing more attractively in "Liliom." I am glad to know that old Henrik believed men should not be selfish and that, instead of looking for success and happiness around the world, they can find it right at home. But "Peer Gynt" does seem a rather complicated way of making a few sound but unremarkable points.

If conscientiousness, determination and hard work were enough for a distinguished performance, John Garfield's portrayal of the title role could be written about with enthusiasm. As it is, Mr. Garfield has some excellent scenes, particularly with his dying mother, and plays with grace and vitality, but I thought his characterization was lacking in eloquence and dramatic stature. Mildred Dunnock is, of course, good as the mother. Karl Malden, that fine actor, is effective as the Button Molder, while Pearl Lang as the wife, Sherry Britton as the Troll King's daughter, and Sono Osato as a dancing girl, are helpful, and I particularly liked Nehemia Persoff as the Troll King. I wish I had more enthusiasm for "Peer Gynt."

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

January 29, 1951

= By HOWARD BARNES =

Fantasy With a Flourish

IT IS small wonder that John Garfield has found Paul Green's version of Ibsen's "Peer Gynt" an exciting theatrical venture. Directed by Lee Strasberg at the ANTA Playhouse, with settings by Donald Oenslager, the poetic fantasy has great style, pace and acting flourish. Garfield dominates the turbulent action throughout as the wandering Norwegian goes from the Hall of the Troll King to the coast of Morocco and a Cairo insane asylum before returning home to make a final reckoning of his life. He bridges some fifty years admirably, brings clarity to evocative lines and achieves a remarkable degree of humor in a tale of individualistic non-conformity and futility. Meanwhile, Karl Malden, Mildred Dunnock, Pearl Lang, Sono Osato and Sherry Britton aid him at every turn of twelve shifting scenes.

* * *

"Peer Gynt" was written in 1867, during Ibsen's self-imposed exile in Italy, and has not been seen here for a quarter of a century. Green has adapted it freely, even to bringing in some rather extraneous contemporary references, but he has kept it eloquent, mystical and lively. Even at the preview performance on Saturday night the work had verve and power which will doubtless be increased with subsequent performances. Valerie Bettis has designed arresting dances for the Troll Kingdom scene and the desert interlude, while Lan Adomian's accompanying score is never too intrusive and the Rose Bogdanoff costumes are elegantly in character with the play's varying moods.

* * *

If there is a fault to be found with the streamlined version on Fifty-second Street, it is the same which Shaw criticized in the original by describing the climax as a "crowningly unreal self-realization." Green has hewed to the quest of Peer Gynt, accenting its material aspects, particularly with the introduction of seductive dancing girls, but he has not made Gynt's final pact with the Buttonmolder who follows him down through the years particularly clear. The swirling scenes before the ending in Oenslager's tricky stage designs give this revival of "Peer Gynt" special appeal.

Garfield's portrayal of the title role is both thoughtful and exuberant. He turns from horseplay to savage exaltation in a brilliantly modulated piece of acting and his scene with the lunatics is downright striking. Miss Dunnock plays his sorrowing mother excellently and Miss Lang is splendid as Solveig. Although unaccustomed to acting in classics, Miss Britton is singularly fetching as the Greenciad Woman and Miss Osato is a sinuous seductress as Anitra. Malden is quietly authoritative as the Buttonmolder and Joseph Anthony has a good bit as the asylum's demented director. All in all "Peer Gynt" is a first-rate revival of a little-known Ibsen drama.

The New York Times

January 29, 1951

John Garfield Acts in Paul Green's Version of Ibsen's 'Peer Gynt' for the Anta Series

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Give everybody all proper credit for trying to bring "Peer Gynt" to life at the Anta Playhouse last evening. For Ibsen's poetic classic is the sort of drama Anta may well take out of the textbooks in its current series. And among those who have worked at the enterprise valiantly are John Garfield in the title role, Paul Green who made the American version, Donald Oenslager who has brilliantly designed the production and Lee Strasberg, who has staged the performance.

But after observing the amenities in a preliminary paragraph we can hardly ignore the basic fact that the current "Peer Gynt" is lifeless. More than a quarter of a century ago Joseph Schildkraut played the part for the Theatre Guild with the warm companionship of the immortal music by Grieg. In the current version they have rescinded Grieg, who wrote a full score, and contented themselves with minor decorations by Lan Adomian.

* * *

Without Grieg there does not seem to be much vitality in this symbolic yarn of a young braggart who squandered a lifetime on egotism and greed. When a contemporary critic remarked that "Peer Gynt" was no poem soon after it was written in 1867, Ibsen flew into a rage and said that the definition of poetry would have to be revised to include his picaresque morality legend. Possibly it is a poem in the original Norwegian text, which is something most Gotham playgoers are unable to read. But it is not poetry in the current version. It is hardly more than a cultural ritual performed inside Mr. Oenslager's ingenious and imposing scenery.

Mr. Garfield is an admirable and likable realistic actor. He has a magnetic personality and a warm voice; and he is winningly sincere. But he never gets Peer Gynt off the ground. His performance is literal and casual, and is completely lacking in poetic animation.

Some other good actors have worked hard to find the genius of Ibsen's drama—Mildred Dunnock as Peer's mother, Pearl Lang as the girl who loves him, Karl Malden as the mystic Buttonmolder Joseph Anthony as a German philosopher and Sono Osato, who has found a place in the desert for a brief dance.

But Mr. Strasberg's direction is so unimaginative that nothing of emotional value comes out of the acting. Valerie Bettis' choreography is not much freer or lighter. Mr. Oenslager is the hero of the production. Following Ibsen's footloose scenario, he has designed enough scenery for a full-size musical show and designed it with beauty and versatility. All credit to everyone who has labored earnestly in behalf of a notable enterprise. Possibly Ibsen began the labor by composing a fable that is heavy-footed in a ponderous German tradition. At any rate, the labor spilled over the footlights into the auditorium last evenings.

Daily Mirror

January 29, 1951

ANTA 'Peer Gynt' Revival Is Something of a Bore

By ROBERT COLEMAN

Cheryl Crawford and R. L. Stevens brought Ibsen's "Peer Gynt" to the ANTA Playhouse last evening, and we must report with regret the revival is something of a bore. Stunning pictorially, it has little with which to reward the ears. Many people of importance and integrity have made financial sacrifices to give us this event, and it is too bad that it isn't more acceptable.

Paul Green, for instance, has made an American version, and it won't win him any Pulitzer prize. This has been a season for modernizing the classics, for putting them into colloquial, slangy English. And, as far as we are concerned, the good old stilted stuff is better. It at least had stature and dignity to compensate for the stuffiness.

Peer Gynt is something of a Lillom pretending to be Peter Pan. He is a good-for-nothing with a vivid imagination and a poetic instinct. He has style and an impishly satiric wit, but it was hard to find any of these qualities on tap last night. Even the cosmic jibes at the weaknesses and glories of mankind and human institutions were dull and blunted.

Film star John Garfield has tossed aside a considerable fortune to come East and essay the title role. We are grateful for his gesture, but we think he misses the essence of the part by a mile. Under Lee Strasberg's pedestrian direction, Garfield creates something akin to a bewildered movie Dead End kid. He lacks scope, sharpness and lyric quality. He is to earth-bound.

Mildred Dunnock, Nehemia Persoff, Karl Malden, Pearl Lang, Sono Osato and Sherry Britton have more to do than most in the large cast, and it is amazing how little impact these gifted artists are able to give their minor assignments. However, Hilel and Aviva, musicians from Israel, offer an interesting Near Eastern interlude.

Donald Oenslager has designed an intricate, fluid and effective production, replete with a turntable and atmospheric lighting. The choreography by Valerie Bettis is run-of-the-mill. It is astounding that so electric a personality hasn't been able to devise more inspired dances. The incidental music by Lan Adomian merely serves to remind us of what a wonderful score Edvard Grieg composed about the Ibsen fantasy.

"Peer Gynt," in our opinion, is no feather in ANTA's cap. It was beguiling to watch, but rather dreary to hear. It certainly did not compensate for a Sunday evening joust with rain, sleet and slippery streets. In fact, the elements outside were more challenging and exciting than those inside the austere ANTA Playhouse.

"King Richard II"

Daily Mirror

January 25, 1951

Evans Is Magnificent As 'King Richard II'

By ROBERT COLEMAN

The New York City Theatre Company revived Shakespeare's "King Richard II," first of the Chronicle Plays, at the City Center last evening. Maurice Evans, the company's artistic supervisor, again has the title role. Associated with him are a number of excellent actors, all of whom are working for token salaries in a worthy enterprise.

In "Richard II," Shakespeare presents the idea that a harassed, plundered nobility has the right to force the abdication of a selfish capricious monarch. The Bard was persuaded to arrange a performance of the tragedy on the eve of Essex's unsuccessful rebellion against Queen Elizabeth. The rebels hoped that it might strengthen their cause. Shakespeare, an unwitting tool of the conspirators, was lucky in that he neither lost the Queen's favor nor his head.

Richard II, however, did lose both his throne and his life. Led by Bolingbroke, who had been banished from England and had his estates unjustly seized, many powerful nobles joined in bringing about the downfall of the playboy king. But not before he had declamed, in a number of fascinating scenes, some of Shakespeare's finest poetry.

Evans has a beautiful voice, and uses it with telling effect. His current Richard seems less effete than was the original in the Spring of 1937, more manly and more truly tragic. This is a role that he has made particularly his own.

Kent Smith is, by contrast, a vigorous, apparently forthright Bolingbroke, though beneath the surface a shrewd politician who knows how to achieve popularity. Reynolds Evans is admirable as the aged Duke of York, torn between the causes of his two nephews. Frederic Worlock dominates several episodes as the courageous John of Gaunt, father of Bolingbroke and uncle of Richard.

Betsy Blair is pretty and pallid as Richard's Queen: Bruce Gordon and Louis Hector are good in other roles.

Margaret Webster, who has staged most of Evans' Shakespearean revivals, directs with a sure and gifted hand. Ben Edwards, on a limited budget, provides a many-scened, opulent production.

We regret that an onrushing deadline does not permit time for merited salues to many other players in the large cast.

Evans is magnificent as Richard II. His stirring performance, which through the years has taken on welcome nuances, is one of the glories of our theatre. We think New Yorkers are indeed fortunate to be able to see such a play at a $3 top. It is a pity the current engagement is limited to but two weeks.

"KING RICHARD II"

Play by William Shakespeare; staged by Margaret Webster; settings by Ben Edwards; costumes by Emeline Roche; executive producer, George Schaefer; presented by Maurice Evans, artistic supervisor, and the New York City Theatre Company at New York City Center, January 24, 1951. The cast:

King Richard II. . Maurice Evans
John of Gaunt. . Frederic Worlock
Henry Bolingbroke. . Kent Smith
Thomas Mowbray. . Bruce Gordon
Duchess of Gloucester. . . . . Cavada Humphrey
Lord Marshall. . . . . Theodore Marcuse
Duke of Aumerle. . . . . George Roy Hill
Herald to Bolingbroke. . . . . Porter Van Zandt
Herald to Mowbray. . . . . Joseph Dooley
Green. . . . . John Kirchnak
Bagot. . . . . Everett Ripley
Bushy. . . . . Chester Stratton
Edmund Langley. . . . . Reynolds Evans
Queen to Richard. . . Betsy Blair
Earl of Northumberland. . . Louis Hector
Lord Ross. . . . . John Straub
Lord Willoughby. . Chris Gampel
A servant. . . . Tom Hughes Sand
Henry Percy. . . . . John Glennon
Captain of Welchmen. . . . . Clem Fowler
Earl of Salisbury. . . . . Porter Van Zandt
Bishop of Carlisle. . . . . Theodore Marcuse
Sir Stephen Scroop. . . . . Wendell Whitten
Abbott of Westminster. . . . Joseph Emmett
Sir Pierce of Exton. . . . . Clem Fowler

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

January 25, 1951

Ripsnorting Tragedy Returns in 'Richard II'

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Type—Tragedy.
Topic—Royalty.
Star—Top form.
Production—Fast, simple.
I find it—Superior.

"King Richard II" at the City Center is right in the tradition of lusty theater that Maurice Evans and Margaret Webster always observe when they work together.

This is the play which just 14 years ago really established Evans as a star. It also gave the American public a new idea about Shakespeare. It forgot pomposity and went in for rip-snorting excitement.

The present production may not have the polish the earlier run of the play had, but it is the kind of theater that tears its innards out for your benefit.

Dreamer and Spendthrift.

This is the story of the Richard who was a dreamer and a spendthrift. He tried to defend himself by Divine Right, yet was the strongest argument against that belief, because he clearly never should have been a King.

He commandeers the estates of his dead uncle, in order to pay for wars in Ireland, which are more of a lark than an affair of state. This offends most of his court. The banished Bolingbroke is able to get back into England and Richard is imprisoned. He yields his crown and is murdered.

It is a tremendous play, centered always about the downfall of the King. As his circumstances grow gloomier, the play becomes stronger. The effect on the onlooker, instead of being downhill, is rising, as the emotions grow bigger.

The playboy King is drowned in sorrow, but he never loses his sharp wit. His jokes sharpen his own tragedy.

Fluid Theater.

This production, like all of Miss Webster's, is very fluid theater. It stages certain scenes before a front curtain and has characters rising from the orchestra pit.

The settings are never elaborate but most adequate. The most effective of all is the dungeon when Richard is murdered. Spotlights make a remarkable pattern and heighten the drama of the killing.

Clearly Maurice Evans loves this role. In the beginning the character is lightweight, and he makes it arrogant and jaunty. As defeat becomes inescapable, his torture is conveyed by his tone and expression with increasing gravity.

The fine speeches ring out with real grandeur in faultless enunciation. They sing with excitement as the man's emotion grows. Finally his voice seems to beat against the wall of his prison, tortured, lonely and hopeless.

Kent Smith plays Bolingbroke, who destroys Richard. Even in the snarling argument of the opening scene, he has a statuesque quality suggesting a man who believes he is destined for great things. He is distant and cold, logically cruel and self-righteous. It is a consistent, powerful portrait.

Frederic Worlock is the elderly Gaunt with the famous speech about "this sceptered isle.". Louis Hector adds strength and dignity as Northumberland and Reynolds Evans has an amusing and effective conception of York.

The New York Times
January 25, 1951

AT THE THEATRE

By BROOKS ATKINSON

By going back to his first success in this country, Maurice Evans has given the City Center its finest and most stirring production. The play is Shakespeare's "Richard II," which Mr. Evans first acted in New York in 1937. He opened in it for a two weeks' engagement last evening.

Whether the first production was as keen and mettlesome as this one is a hard question to answer after all these years. But at the moment Mr. Evans' current incarnation seems to be his most glorious one and the whole production one of the most forthright versions of Shakespeare we have ever had.

* * *

For Margaret Webster, back on the podium again, has put the performance together with brilliant clarity and filled it with strength and decision. Mr. Evans' Richard is still his most memorable work. It is sunny and supercilious in the beginning, pathetic in the middle scenes and abject in the end—but always intelligent, vibrant, neat and animated. You would hardly expect so weak a King to make so triumphant a figure in a play.

He is ably balanced by Kent Smith, whose Bolingbroke is manly and commanding, though nicely seasoned with the court ceremonies of the period. There is, unfortunately, a rather colorless queen, which has the effect of letting one of the sweetest scenes escape from the drama. But the rest of the cast is our theatre at its best. Frederic Worlock's sorrowful Gaunt, Reynolds Evans' fussy, distraught York, Louis Hector's cold-blooded Northumberland and Bruce Gordon's bellicose Mowbray are vigorously stated in terms of the theatre and drawn up into the closely woven fabric of a splendid performance.

Without being pretentious, Ben Edwards' settings are useful and stimulating; and the costumes, which look like the originals, are as terse and powerful as the acting. Let's all say a word of thanks to Mr. Evans and Miss Webster for giving the City Center a generous share of the theatre's richest treasure.

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With "Richard II" and "King Lear" simultaneously on view, playgoers have a rare opportunity to see how Shakespeare developed as poet, dramatist and human being. For "Richard II" was written about ten years earlier than "King Lear," and at a time when Shakespeare, tasting the first fruits of success, was in a happy, self-confident mood. Life looked fairly simple to him then. He thought he knew all the answers, and understood the affairs of kings. Cause and effect work out a neat pattern of success and failure in "Richard II." Although Shakespeare was sympathetic to the kings, queens and courtiers involved, he did not burrow deeply into their souls. In harmony with his sanguine mood, the verse is facile and pleasing. If Shakespeare had never developed as a man and an artist he would have remained on the level of "Richard II"—talented and ingratiating but a little formal.

Within the next decade he dived into the fiery pit; and by the time he wrote "King Lear" he was crying out with rage and anguish against the corruption and evil of the world. "King Lear" is almost unintelligible with fury. The characters are bursting with passion and twisted into a hideous phantasmagoria of malevolent intrigue, and the verse cracks and screams like nothing else ever written in the English language. Shakespeare had been shaken out of his mood of complacent affability, presumably by some shattering personal experience.

* * *

What happened? Probably we shall never know. B. Talbot Kardos, a Shakespearean scholar, is working on a study which suggests that a disastrous love affair between Shakespeare and Mary Fitton may have broken his magic world wide open, since the essential known dates coincide. All we really know is that within this decade Shakespeare became a titanic artist. There may never again be a time when New York playgoers can compare the attractive youth who wrote "Richard II" with the bitter man who wrote "King Lear."

"Richard II" is the weaker play. But you would hardly realize it from Mr. Evans' performance and the acting of his associates. For they have recognized the characters as human beings with the common passions of pride, greed and revenge; and the narrative of Richard's fall from monarch to the Tower is a sensational one. You can see in this play the germ of "Hamlet." But there is more pith and moment in Mr. Evans' "Richard II" than you are likely to find in most productions of "Hamlet." It is a rare Shakespeare production that is so lucid, brisk, penetrating and forceful.

New York Post
HOME NEWS
January 25, 1951

Maurice Evans in His Best Role
By Richard Watts Jr.

The Richard II of Maurice Evans is one of the distinguished performances of the modern American theatre, and it was a pleasure to see Mr. Evans again last night at the City Center in this most satisfying of all his roles. Since he is just as skillful and eloquent as ever, if not even a bit more so, as the luckless Plantaganet, and Margaret Webster has once more staged the tragedy vigorously, the news from the civic enterprise on West 55th Street is good today. This is the Shakespearean drama presented as it should be.

Mr. Evans brings to his playing of Shakespeare three qualities that are of the utmost importance. He knows how to speak the magnificent lines with all the fire and beauty that are necessary to them. But he is never satisfied to be merely a superb elocutionist. He also has the ability to act the famous roles like the living drama that they are, and to give them warmth, understanding and vitality. Then, as a third characteristic, he is a first-rate showman, who knows that the Bard's plays can also be fine shows, and that is how he presents them.

'The Death of Kings'

He is, of course, at his best in the scenes that call on his gift for eloquence, and "King Richard II" is rich in such episodes. The famous speech about "let us sit upon the ground and tell sad stories of the death of kings" is rendered superbly, but he never makes it just splendid poetry. It is also tremendously arresting dramatically. He is brilliant, too, in the scene where Bolingbroke tries to make him surrender the crown, mingling a tragic sense with a bitterly sardonic humor in a manner that is nothing short of magnificent.

"King Richard II" is, I suppose not one of the major Shakespearean tragedies, but, properly played, it can be a remarkably interesting play. Its early English politics can be slightly confusing upon occasion, but the conspiracies never seem as wildly chaotic to a modern audience as they have a way of doing in, for example, "Richard III." Chiefly, of course, it is the character of the second Richard that gives the drama its impressivenes, and, under Mr. Evans' guidance, the unfortunate king is always a believable and touching human being.

Richard's Growth

There is something particularly fascinating about the way Richard grows in adversity. A shallow, inept, rather foolish king in the days of his success, failure is a kind of tonic to him and he ends as a genuinely tragic figure of rather heroic stature. And he certainly doesn't believe in the Anglo-Saxon tradition of the stiff upperlip. In a bitter, mocking fashion, he almost seems to revel in his doomed unhappiness, and he pours forth his bitterness at himself and the world so stirringly that the incompetent ruler becomes almost a giant among successful pygmies.

Although the play is, of course, Mr. Evans' vehicle, there are a number of good performances in the lesser roles. Kent Smith, an actor of increasing stature, is a satisfactory Bolingbroke, and I particularly liked Louis Hector as Northumberland, Bruce Gordon as Mowbray, Reynolds Evans as York, and Frederic Worlock as John of Gaunt. The production, as nearly as I can remember, follows the style and manner of the presentation Mr. Evans and Miss Webster first offered in 1937 with so much success. It is good to see our foremost living Shakespearean actor once more in his finest role.